



Montgomery County Council

From the Office of Councilmember Roger Berliner

July 28, 2009

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City of Rockville Joins Montgomery Councilmember Berliner's Drive to Have Maryland Establish 'Sustainable Transportation Corridors'

**Councilmember Has Advocated Better Coordination Between
State and Local Governments on Land Use, Transportation**

ROCKVILLE, Md., July 28, 2009—The City of Rockville's Mayor and Council on Monday, July 27, approved sending a letter to Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley in support of a statewide Sustainable Transportation Corridors Initiative proposed earlier this month by Montgomery County District 1 Councilmember Roger Berliner.

On July 13, Councilmember Berliner wrote to Governor O'Malley to urge that state leaders work more closely with local governments to promote sustainable design and priority funding for state highways that act as "main streets" through Smart Growth areas. In addition to Rockville, a number of civic and environmental organizations have indicated to Councilmember Berliner that they are considering joining the effort by also sending letters to the governor in support of the initiative.

In his letter of July 13, Councilmember Berliner, who is the lead member for energy and environment on the Council's Transportation, Infrastructure, Energy and Environment Committee, wrote to the Governor: "I am writing to ask you, Acting [State Department of Transportation] Secretary [Beverley] Swaim-Staley and our legislative leadership to explore new legislation or regulations that would enhance coordination between state and local governments, harmonize land use and transportation objectives, and provide priority funding for 'Sustainable Transportation Corridors.'"

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Councilmember Berliner said Maryland should explore establishing a program similar to a policy in Oregon. The program would seek to ensure that future investments in highways “are considered in the context of our larger public policy objectives of reducing vehicle miles traveled and supporting livable communities.”

Councilmember Berliner said in his letter that Maryland’s current approach to building new major roads has not always addressed long-term needs.

Rockville's Mayor and Council on July 27 approved sending a letter of support for the Sustainable Transportation Corridors Initiative that would include a two-mile section of Rockville Pike within the City limits. The letter encourages the state to facilitate inter-jurisdictional coordination on the redevelopment of Rockville Pike.

“Councilmember Berliner’s formulation of the Sustainable Transportation Corridors Initiative matches Rockville’s goals,” Rockville Mayor Susan Hoffmann wrote in the City’s letter to Governor O’Malley.

In 2007, Rockville began a process to envision how the Rockville Pike corridor could function better. Redesigning the section of Rockville Pike south of Rockville Town Center is an emerging core concept of the plan to improve the environment for pedestrians, transit-users, drivers and cyclists. Implementing the redesign plan will require cooperation between the State Highway Administration, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (Metro), Montgomery County and the City.

If the State initiates the Sustainable Transportation Corridors program as proposed by Councilmember Berliner, designating Rockville Pike a Sustainable Transportation Corridor would prioritize the project for state funding, coordination and other support.

“Regrettably, our current approach to significant state roads that bisect our increasingly urban county too often focuses on isolated intersection improvements in one area totally divorced from the larger context,” wrote Councilmember Berliner in his July 13 letter. “The result can be short term ‘improvements’ that are actually counterproductive in the long run. As the County Council representative of the communities that surround the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, I have witnessed this possibility first hand. Indeed, it is this experience that led me to explore other models that might serve our state and community better.”

The full text of Councilmember Berliner’s letter to Governor O’Malley:

Dear Governor O’Malley:

I am writing to ask you, Acting Secretary Swaim-Staley, and our legislative leadership to explore new legislation or regulations that would enhance coordination between state and local governments, harmonize land use and transportation objectives, and provide priority funding for "Sustainable Transportation Corridors."

Modeled after a similar policy in Oregon, the goal of this program would be to ensure that future investments in state highway segments that (1) are of extraordinary economic significance to the state; (2) are experiencing unacceptable levels of congestion; and (3) straddle urban smart growth areas, are considered in the context of our larger public policy objectives of reducing vehicle miles traveled and supporting livable communities.

Regrettably, our current approach to significant state roads that bisect our increasingly urban county too often focuses on isolated intersection improvements in one area totally divorced from the larger context. The result can be short term "improvements" that are actually counterproductive in the long run. As the County Council representative of the communities that surround the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, I have witnessed this possibility first hand. Indeed, it is this experience that led me to explore other models that might serve our state and community better.

To the credit of your people in the State Highway Administration, who recently testified before our Council, are trying hard to come up with a plan that would provide immediate short term relief to a looming traffic nightmare. As you appreciate, under the Base Closure and Realignment Act (BRAC) the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda is expanding and will reopen in 2011 as the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. This expanded facility will treat twice as many patients, add 2500 new jobs, and increase traffic on a roadway that is already subject to unacceptable levels of congestion.

At the same time, just to the north of the expanded Medical Center, the Montgomery County Planning Department is currently drafting a new "White Flint Sector Plan," which calls for compact mixed-use redevelopment. The Plan envisions the transformation of a section of the Rockville Pike into a multi-modal urban "boulevard" with a landscaped median, street parking, wider sidewalks, bike lanes, a grid of streets to take pressure off Rockville Pike, and much needed mass transit improvements, including the possibility of bus rapid transit.

Yet, to date, we have not stepped back collectively and assessed the needs of the entire Rockville Pike/Wisconsin Avenue corridor, without question one of the most important transportation corridors in the entire state. It is increasingly clear that pavement alone is not going to get the job done and would be counterproductive to our long term energy and environmental objectives, which can be met only if we significantly reduce vehicle miles traveled, expand transit options, and encourage more biking and walking.

The aim of legislation creating Sustainable Transportation Corridors would be to establish that broader context, to bring the best of urban planning and progressive transportation policies together to support sustainable and vibrant communities, and to give priority to such areas of statewide significance.

Governor, I know that you and our legislative leaders are firmly committed to sustainability. The legislation that you and our state legislature have championed puts Maryland at the environmental forefront. In my view, legislation creating Sustainable Transportation Corridors is consistent with and builds upon this commitment. I commend it to you and our legislative leaders for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Roger Berliner

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